Reclaiming refugee agency and its implications for shelter design in refugee camps

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Abstract: Refugee agency refers to the notion of decision making exercised by forced migrants, and their efforts aimed at improving life in the context of displacement. As such, it has emerged as a useful concept to channel discussions about the challenges of current refugee encampment practices, which we argue encompasses consequences for the design and provision of shelter solutions. Building on the evidence collected in selected refugee camps of Jordan and Ethiopia, we suggest that acknowledging and incorporating the voices of refugees can not only enhance their well-being in climatically, socially and politically challenging environments, but it could also be beneficial to other actors such as humanitarian agencies and host governments. While we recognize the constrains arising in these contexts, we focus on the importance of adaptations and customization of shelters that we found to be the leitmotiv and, more critically, a fundamental humanizing factor of refugee experience in camps. The refugees' freedom to make choices about their own shelters can then be used to rethink how to deliver better environments in which camp inhabitants can live in dignity. Although engineering design can only facilitate agency, rather than give it, it could help build the consensus about the pre-requisites of what constitutes truly 'appropriate' shelters.

Keywords: refugee, camps, shelter, agency, design, Jordan, Ethiopia

1 Introduction

In the area of refugee studies, the term refugee agency has been juxtaposed against the cultural representation of displaced people as voiceless and passive victims portrayed as the objects of humanitarian interventions, rather than the subjects capable of making choices and taking control of their life trajectories, albeit in very difficult situations. The first narrative depicts refugees as oppressed by institutions, in this case, by camp management, whereas the one that emphasizes the strategies used by them to oppose this domination tends to romanticize the encampment. Both approaches, however, reveal a degree of interpretative bias by either underestimating the autonomy of refugees whilst demonising role of the humanitarian sector, or by exaggerating the refugee's capacity to resist institutional, legal and political structures embedded in the refugee administration (Fresia 2007).

Humanitarian sector is often seen as overtly preoccupied with technical solutions given the requirements of dealing with emergency situations, as well as the character of funding, namely that donors tend to be more generous at the beginning of a crisis, with funds dwindling with time passage. The often-ad hoc, rushed, and therefore not including consultations with refugees, response of the sector to a crisis can be interpreted as geared towards control and surveillance (Agier 2010). Furthermore, the lack of participatory approach has led to erroneous aid programmes (see Zetter (1991) and Crisp (2001) for an overview) and the call to embed refugees' views in implementation of aid is not new; multiple studies have shown that refugees are agents capable of articulating their own needs and seeking solutions to challenges that they face (Essed et al. 2004; Dona 2007; Harrell-Bond & Voutira 2007; Brun & Lund 2010). Wilson (1992, p.226) points out that refugees suffer the most not when less than average level of assistance is provided, but when their own survival

and adaptation strategies have been particularly limited by authorities and/or relief agencies in the name of concerns for security and control, or merely for the purpose of administering aid more smoothly. On the other hand, it is evident from interviews that we carried out with humanitarian staff in Jordan that leaving refugees to their own devices might lead to technically inappropriate solutions, and consequently, possible risks of fire, flooding and other hazards. A third perspective, aiming to combine the aforementioned approaches, recommends that humanitarian interventions should explicitly include refugees in their programming, fully recognising their agency and potential to ameliorate their living standards in the situation of displacement (Harrell-Bond 1986; Harrell-Bond 1989; Allen 1996; Hyndman 2000; Chimni 2009).

In our interdisciplinary project 'Healthy Housing for the Displaced', we argue that detangling those complex relationships between refugees, humanitarian actors and host countries can lead to enhancing the sustainability of aid initiatives, as well as to fostering refugees' ownership of programmes implemented by the sector. Not only is the project multivocal due to its interdisciplinary character, but also because we work with all the actors engaged in camp governance, namely refugees, UNHCR and other UN agencies and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs), as well as representatives of host governments. Up until now, the project identified shelter performance shortcomings and characterised the thermal needs of camp dwellers in Jordan (Albadra et al. 2017) and proposed consequent design solutions (Fosas et al. 2018). Furthermore, it has suggested negotiating a consensus which challenges the current dichotomy (McGrath et al. 2018), calling all actors to work together in order to improve shelters for displaced populations (Albadra et al. 2018). Building on these efforts, we advocate here for refugee agency to be the fundamental guiding principle of the shelter provision process. In this context, refugee agency is a factor that guarantees dignity of camp dwellers and, entails certain design practices as emanating from the field work conducted in this project.

2 Institutional framework

Refugee camps are regulated settings governed by bodies representing a host state; the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; and other UN agencies alongside INGOs, as well as small local organizations. Shelters in refugee camps are loosely regulated housing units. Their dimensions are defined by the Sphere Project (2011) and follow the requirement that each shelter should provide a minimum three-and-a-half square meters of covered living space to every resident. In many cases, this is not implemented in practice; for example, in the Hitsats camp (Ethiopia) an average of five to nine persons live in one concrete block house which is only 4m x 5m. Some regulations are vague, and therefore either not followed at all, or easy to negotiate, for example the requirement "where possible" to provide shelter that is acceptable "socially and culturally" to its intended occupants (The Sphere project 2011, p.258). To the best of our knowledge, there is no institutional actor responsible for making shelters culturally appropriate for a particular group of people, and it is either ignored or left to largely unstructured consultations with refugees such as those carried out by UNHCR in some Ethiopian camps (UNHCR & ARRA 2017).

Discussion on refugees' agency in refugee camps inevitably involves the aspect of time, namely the alleged dichotomy between temporariness and permanency. The often-quoted average time of 17 years that refugees spend in camps is actually inaccurate; it does not refer to camps – majority of refugees live in urban areas – and it is limited to the duration of displacement situations, not the time that people stay in exile (Devictor & Do 2016). The

length of protracted refugee situations does however last decades, with oldest refugee camps dating back to 1947 (Cooper's Camp in India, following the partition) and 1948 (Palestinian camps in the Levant set up after the establishment of Israel). What we often saw in the course of our research was a narrative that permitting refugees to improve their shelters will influence their decision to stay in the camp for longer; therefore, those adaptations are undesirable from the perspective of host states and donors, and sometimes refugees themselves, as the homemaking process may be seen as undermining their claims for long term solutions to displacement. Under this discourse, ensuring that refugee camp remains a transient space would, for instance, facilitate an easier management of possible returns, the preferred UNHCR durable solution to refugee crisis. This argument is built on the assumption of a rigid dichotomy between temporariness and permanency, and consequently, the association of shelter enhancement with permanency. We argued elsewhere (Hart et al. 2018) that it is lack of alternatives, and/or ongoing conflict in the country of origin, rather than degree of satisfaction experienced in a camp, that impacts refugees' decision to relocate.

Depending on the political context, host states impose a different set of their own rules, for example in relation to buildings materials. The Jordanian authorities forbid usage of concrete in Syrian refugee camps as it symbolically signifies the permanence of camps and recalls the Palestinian presence in the country largely composed of different refugee groups that have previously blended into the Jordanian nation-state. On the other hand, in Hitsats, Eritrean refugee camp in North Ethiopia, all shelters are essentially permanent and built of bricks, and there are no restrictions in relation to adaptations made by refugees. Overall, camp administration policies and practices are not rigid, even though they often strive at appearing so; they may change their position over time, and this tends to fluctuate towards relaxing the rules (Hart et al. 2018). For example, residents of Zaatari camp in Jordan were initially provided with communal kitchens and bathrooms. People did not want to use them, and eventually were given private facilities instead. In a more regulated Azraq camp refugees repetitively plant trees outside their shelters in the night, even though they are then removed by the authorities in the daytime. The assumption is that one day the governmental authorities will turn a blind eye to this practice (and probably they will). In Hitsats refugees are not allowed to keep dogs as a precaution against rabies outbreak, but in one instance a puppy was hidden during the day and roamed freely in the night; by the time she grew up, no one seemed to remember about the regulation that was forbidding dogs in the camp. Therefore, it seems that the relationship between refugees and actors managing the camp often takes form of a cat-and-mouse game, an unspoken testimony of refugees' autonomy battling against the institutional odds.

3 Refugee's agency and shelter adaptations

Drawing on the anthropology of architecture, we argue that through the production of material forms, such as dwellings, people define and order socio-cultural relationships in the process that mutually constitutes one another, subjects and objects (Vellinga 2007, p.761). In other words, one could coin a dictum, "how the things that people make, make people" (Küchler & Miller 2005, p.38, as cited by Vellinga 2007) which very much resonates in the context of displacement camps, effectively in the state of constant re-making by refugees.

3.1 The case of Zaatari and Azraq camps in Jordan

A very good example of this mutually constitutive relationship is the construction of *al madafah*, space for receiving guests. None of the surveyed shelter solutions accounted for guestrooms in their design, and refugees have themselves built spaces needed to welcome

visitors. The primary function of such spaces is to offer a comfortable setting for the very important cultural practice of visiting, serving food and drinks to one's guests, a prerequisite to harmonious communal life. Islamic Sharia law explicitly recommends that hospitality should be a principle guiding the design of dwellings in the Muslim context (Othman et al. 2015). The guestroom also allows to uphold one's social status and family honour, and therefore re-asserts social identity after experiencing the rupture caused by conflict and forced migration.

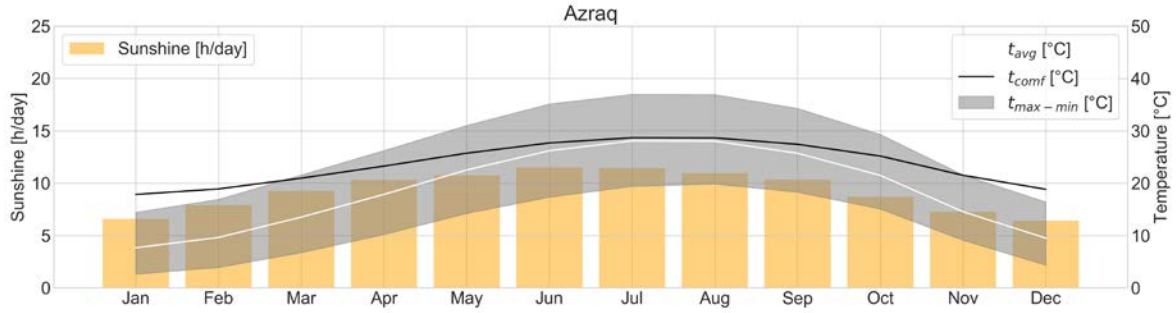
Taking Zaatari as an example, the conditions in the camp allowed for an unintended exercise of ownership by the refugees over their shelters. Given that these are highly portable caravans, refugees could relocate within the camp and freely arrange their shelters to create the spaces they needed (Albadra et al. 2018). Some people have over time developed, depending on their skills and financial situation, very elaborate guestrooms that included bird towers, water fountains and small gardens, providing refuge from the summer heat. According to our interviews with UNHCR staff in Jordan, at least 50% of the camp was effectively re-made by refugees themselves. From the institutional actors' perspective this led to health and safety hazards; for example, people were moving caravans in the way that was blocking the access to roads in case of emergency.

On the contrary, Azraq camp opened at a later stage, and was ready for inhabitation prior to the arrival of refugees. Azraq designers seem to have considered the shortcomings of Zaatari camp from a care-giver's perspective — rather than from the refugees' perspective — into a highly organised plan based on villages, districts, blocks and shelters[1]. Focusing on the shelter solution, the design did not take advantage of the of the climate at the location (Figure 1-a), being mainly constrained by cost, speed of construction, structural and fire safety. These resulted in a single-room lightweight shelter made of steel where the only heavyweight element of the construction is the concrete slab, which uses the internal walls as the formwork (Figure 1-b). As such, the shelter cannot be reconfigured in the same ways the caravans were in Zaatari, and the main space is used as a bedroom during night time and a guestroom during daytime.

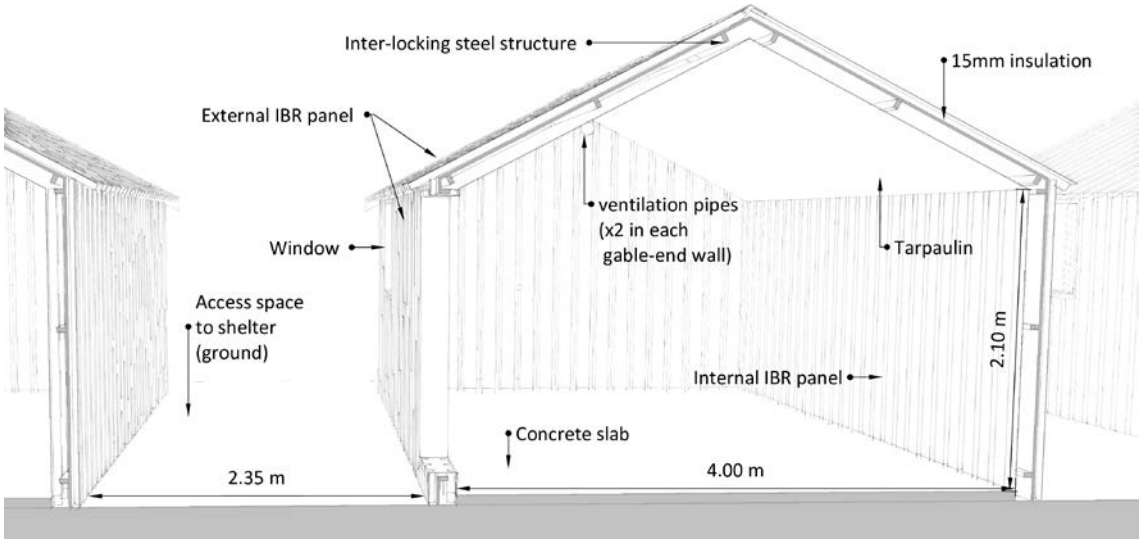
The current in-use state of the shelters clearly highlights the shortcomings of the original design and the ways in which the owners adapted the space (Figure 1-c). People inhabiting these shelters report high levels of thermal discomfort as assessed in field studies (Albadra et al. 2017), since the lightweight construction follows closely the wide range of daily external temperatures (Figure 1-a). This causes, for example, internal condensation in winter and surfaces becoming too hot to touch in the summer. At present, many shelters have been retrofitted with an extra layer of 15mm insulation in the internal walls besides people's own adaptations including hanging fabrics. In many instances, the inhabitants have even opened new windows to enhance natural ventilation. The reasons are that the ventilation pipes provided cannot be operated by the occupants and cause excessive sand ingress, and that privacy is not preserved with the window on the same side of the entrance to the shelter. The concrete floor is usually carpeted and sprayed with water in the summer to provide some evaporative cooling. Since the walls are drilled to the structure and anchored into the ground, the shelter can only expand in-between other units, an appropriation not foreseen in the design and not allowed by the camp management. This space allows to cook outdoors to minimize the heat gain inside the shelter or to grow a small garden which is a cherished aspect of Syrian culture. The modification attempted by the owners in this regard is to enclose this

[1] See Dalal et al. (2018) for a discussion on the planning of Zaatari and Azraq.

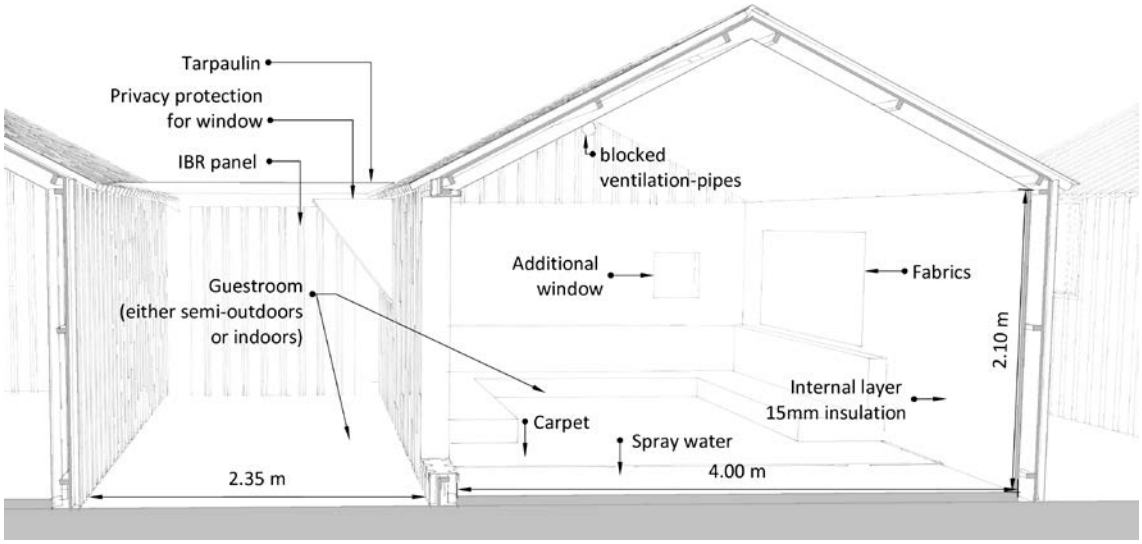
space with an additional wall on one side or tarpaulins as an improvised roof. Overall, even though Azraq camp benefitted from pre-planning the infrastructure and the shelter design, it did not build on the unintended success of Zaatari in terms of refugee agency and the refugees' ownership of their shelters.



a) Climate overview – Nicol graph (data: Gelaro et al. (2017) and Schroedter-Homscheidt et al. (2017))



b) Shelter as designed



c) Shelter as used

Figure 1: Azraq case study (Jordan, latitude 32°N)

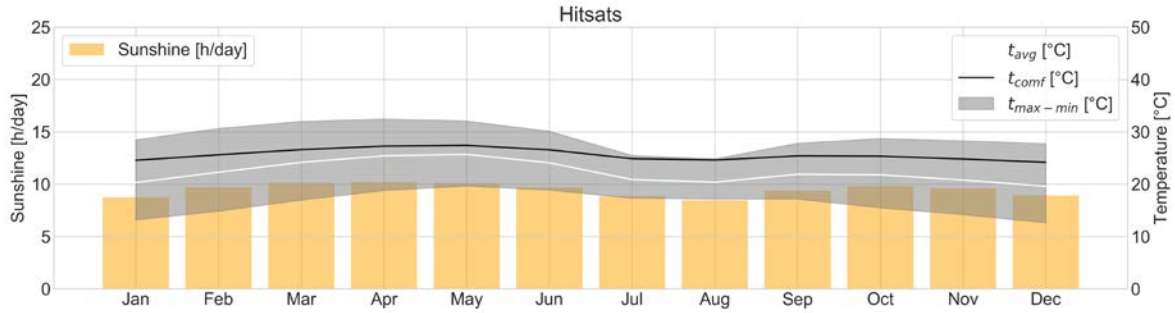
3.2 The case of Hitsats camp in Ethiopia

The case of the Hitsats refugee camp in Ethiopia depicts a different scenario both culturally and climatically. For instance, Eritreans socialize around coffee ceremony, *buna jebena*, which involves roasting raw coffee beans and takes on average 1–2 hours to prepare. It is traditionally performed 3 times a day, usually only by women, and a guest should drink three cups of freshly brewed coffee in order not to offend the host. Gender norms, and consequently, the understanding of privacy, are more relaxed in Hitsats than among Syrian refugees so in most cases we did not see any partitions inside the dwellings, even when these were inhabited by young single people of both sexes, who are the dominant demographic group in the camp. Young men and women living in one shelter tended to say that they are friends, and that they trust each other. They also shared household chores, with men bringing firewood and women preparing food. This is also due to the impact of indefinite compulsory military service in Eritrea: people aged 16–18 leave their family for military training, and friendship bonds acquire significant cultural meaning.

In terms of climate, Hitsats depicts relatively warm conditions, with temperatures in the range of 15–35 °C, and daily temperature swings of 15 °C approximately (Figure 2-a). As hinted by the temperature drop between June and September, there is a wet season that features not only high humidity but also strong rainfalls and wind gusts. The shelters here are made of concrete blocks for the walls and corrugated metal sheets of timber trusses for the roof (Figure 2-b). It is erected over flattened raised ground to minimize water ingress. The interior is an unfurnished single space of 17 m^2 with single-side ventilation through the door and the window, although gable-end walls include air bricks. The unit also features an external bathroom unit with a toilet and a shower detached from the shelter.

The adaptations performed by the camp dwellers are done on three levels (Figure 2-c). At interior-space level, it is the construction of mud furniture, mainly beds inside the shelters which recreates a sensory memory of home, given that people would not normally sleep on the floor in Eritrea. At shelter level, the main adaptations are to build a double roof because of water leaks and to paint the outer walls to repel insects. At plot-level, owners that can afford it build an outdoor sitting space to receive guests and perform the coffee ceremony because the single-sided ventilation system of the shelter does not provide enough ventilation to purge the smoke and the heat.

Prior to a formal thermal comfort study, a similar social survey to that performed in Azraq was conducted in Hitsats. Residents reported thermal comfort to be the highest concern when asked about their accommodation. Given that the comfort temperature is in general well within the mild external temperatures and that the shelter provides some thermal mass thanks to the bricks, this is speculated to be due to the single roof, lack of appropriate ventilation regimes due to single-sided ventilation, overcrowding of the shelter and heat gains due to cooking and related activities.



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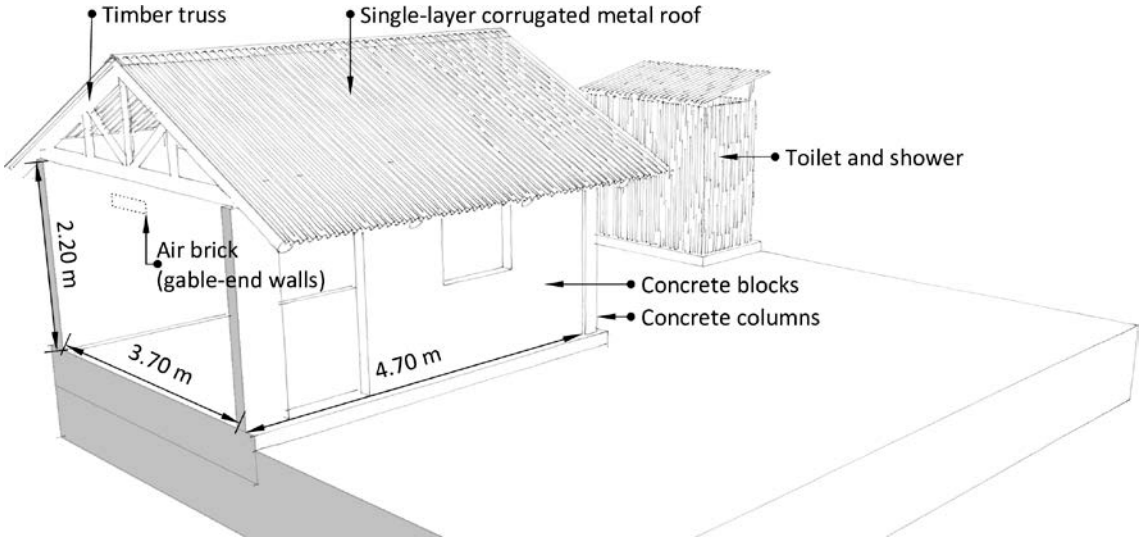

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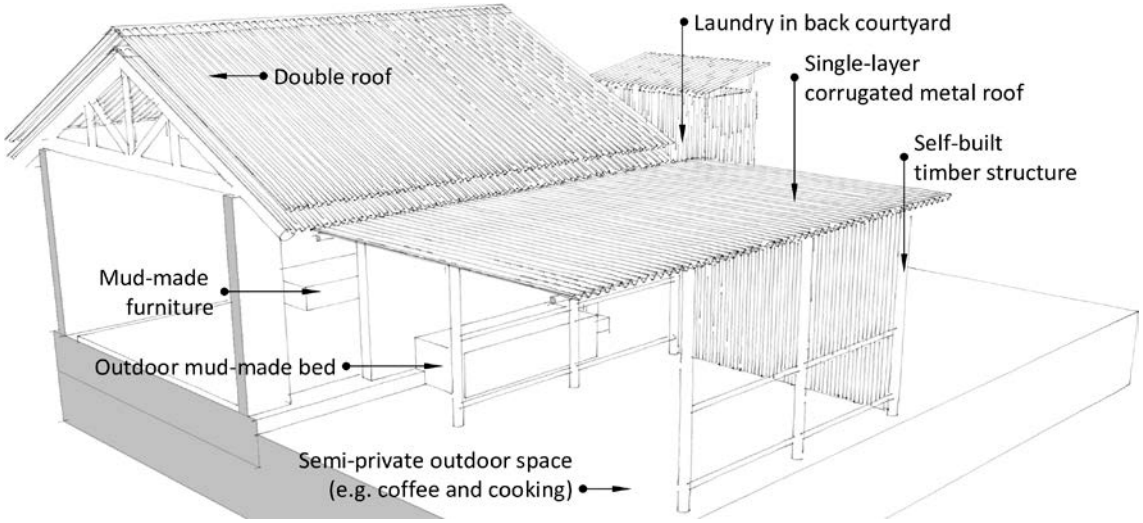

c) Shelter as used

Figure 2: Hitsats case study (Ethiopia, latitude 14°N)

4 Discussion

We have seen how cultural norms and practices play a fundamental role in how the affected populations adapt, modify and enhance their dwellings, not only in the case studies presented but also in the course of our fieldwork in other refugee camps and internally displaced people's settlements (Bangladesh, Nepal and Turkey). Whilst the importance of culture is nowadays generally acknowledged in the humanitarian sector's programming, it is an aspect that does not seem to inform current shelter solutions yet. Participatory approach tends to be applied to livelihoods and protection activities in refugee camps, rather than to shelter sector. We are calling for those efforts to be extended to shelter design, thereby reclaiming refugee agency as a fundamental aspect that should not be neglected in this process. The case studies presented here portray not only shortcomings that would have been overcome by an improved design methodology, but also how refugees do exercise decision-making to shape their environments, regardless of, and sometimes clearly at odds with the institutional constraints of encampment. This ability of humans to choose and to act autonomously is a prerequisite for dignity:

> *"To be an agent, in the fullest sense of which we are capable, one must (first) choose one's own path through life — that is, not be dominated or controlled by someone or something else (call it 'autonomy'). […] And having chosen, one must then be able to act; that is, one must have at least the minimum provisions of resources and capabilities that it takes (call all of this 'minimum provision') […] so others must not forcibly stop one from pursuing what one sees as a worthwhile life (call this 'liberty')." (Griffin 2008, p.33).*

Since refugees in camps are unable to enjoy full control over their lives, a combination of the top-down approach and bottom-up approach would be an initial step forward. This could combine the expertise of discipline-specific designers to establish the technical requirements and efficient use of resources of technical solutions with structured consultations carried out with refugees as soon as feasible. The preparation stage for transitional shelters should include a portfolio of culturally appropriate solutions in different contexts which could be developed with help of anthropologists. This would provide a basic framework to ignite conversations with refugees, not to impose those preconceived technocratic solutions on them.

Besides the discussions about the overall design of camps and the particular shelter solutions, we would like to draw the attention to how those two scales are articulated. As seen in these case studies, the immediate outdoor space to a shelter plays a fundamental role to support semi-private/public activities of special significance to camp dwellers. This suggests that shelter surroundings need to be explicitly accounted for in the planning of the camp as a space that can foster the agency of refugees. Although UNHCR does use the concept of 'plot' in their camp masterplans in some locations, what we recommend is to consider how the shelters can be expanded within such plots by refugees themselves.

It might be useful for all actors to think how the funds provided by donors at the onset of a crisis can be invested to establish camp infrastructure and agree with the refugees what the basic shelter provision needs to fulfil (e.g. private bedroom space, individual toilet facilities). Camp dwellers would then take over to maintain and extend their shelters into this space to further support the continuation of cultural practices of neighbourliness and forging a community the new location. Such a strategy would combine the technical requirements of institutional actors with the much-needed agency practice by camp dwellers.

5 Conclusions

This paper explores the idea of how agency not only humanizes the refugee experience but also how it can help tackling design challenges in complex situations of refugee crisis characterised by pressures faced by humanitarian agencies and demands articulated by host governments. We do not wish to neither normalize nor romanticize encampment in our attempt to reclaim refugees' agency towards improving current shelter practices. We acknowledge the precarity of life in a refugee camp, but we would like to draw attention to agency amidst the constraints that we observed in Zaatari and Azraq Syrian refugee camps in Jordan, as well as in Hitsats, Eritrean refugee camp in Ethiopia. We call for a dialogue between agencies and residents, in order to find a consensus between refugees' need for flexibility and the authorities' focus on manageability in the context of scarce resources and political constraints.

From the design perspective, it is crucial that designers support camp inhabitants in their efforts to improve the shelters through understanding of architectural settings in which social relations are conducted in a given culture with solutions that are not just technically and climatically relevant. An explicit acknowledgement of agency in the encampment situation would allow refugees to acquire a sense of control over their lives, while making an efficient use of limited resources available to those who govern refugee camps.

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